



How Can Authentic Community Engagement be Fostered Through Federal Policy?

RICHARD GRAY

A robust body of research shows that authentic community involvement in improving schools is key to sustainable and successful reform; how can that goal be translated into federal policy?

Sara McAlister, in her article in this issue of *VUE*, lays out the strong research base showing that “family and community participation is a crucial resource not only for individual student achievement, but also for catalyzing and sustaining school improvement and for building school cultures that support all students.” In this article, *VUE* editors sat down with Richard Gray, AISR’s director of national community organizing and engagement,¹ to ask a few key questions about the implications of this research for identifying best practices and suggesting how federal policy can support them.

¹ For more on the Center for Education Organizing, a major project of AISR’s national community organizing and engagement work, see the sidebar on page 44.

Q Why is community engagement essential in education?

A Because of the perceived lack of political power and social capital in low-income communities and communities of color, there are often no consequences for the continued provision of poor educational services and resources to children in those neighborhoods. However, we believe the democratic engagement of parents and residents in collective action focused on school improvement can build the power and public will necessary to improve and sustain the quality of public schools in low-income urban communities as well as hold public institutions accountable for responsive and better-quality services.

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To build this support, districts and schools have to enter into new forms of public collaboration and partnership with structures that encourage and support the active participation and ownership of parents, students, and community residents in the public education process. We define *community engagement to improve student achievement* as the capacities and strategies to gain public support and create partnerships with communities to generate and sustain the necessary resources to improve public schools.

AISR has developed a framework – the “smart education system” – to describe this type of collaboration among different institutional and community sectors to mobilize support and demand for an effective and accountable school system. A smart education system is most effective in addressing the needs of students when there are ongoing opportunities for a range of stakeholders and constituency groupings to debate, negotiate, and articulate the education goals or purposes they share, and to build relationships and structures that link the capacity of those various players to the pursuit of common purposes. Those include opportunities for the following:

- Creating a shared space for educators, families, community members, and organizations to identify, research, analyze, and address common issues on teaching and learning. This shared space allows parents and the community to learn more about issues of teaching and learning from a practitioner’s perspective.
- Building trust relationships between educators, families, and communities that allow a more sophisticated analysis of what is needed to improve schools. When time and space is devoted to having families and communities actively engage in problem solving with educators and these conversations are informed by research and data, not misperceptions and ideology, it creates an ideal community engagement setting with collaboration, active and accountable relationships, and a focus on addressing a common purpose – improving schools and increasing student achievement.
- Encouraging and supporting collaborative efforts *within* communities as well as *between* communities and the school system to support sustained student achievement. Getting one parent to engage with

AISR’S CENTER FOR EDUCATION ORGANIZING

The Center for Education Organizing (CEO), a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, supports groups organizing for educational justice in underserved communities. CEO staff provide research, policy analysis, and training to support individual groups and national networks to meaningfully engage in education reform. The CEO also facilitates alliance building among education organizing groups, and between those groups and other stakeholders such as civil rights and advocacy organizations, teachers unions, academics, and education researchers.

For more information and to download free publications, go to <http://annenberginstitute.org/project/center-education-organizing>.

the school is good, but getting a group of parents working together is better. Getting a group of parents is good, but connecting with an organization with roots, resources, and relationships in that community to support those parents is better. Connection with one organization is good, but helping to build a coalition of organizations with a range of resources and relationships with parents and a community constituency is better. Families, communities, and educators each have some power individually, but none have the requisite power alone to support sustained, long-term reforms that can turn around schools, close the achievement gap, and help students build comprehensive skills for success in college, work, and civic life.

Q What assets and capacities do communities have to support improvement in their schools?

A Traditionally, urban districts have obtained assistance through partnerships with large, influential organizations – members of the corporate sector, major media outlets, and the large-budget non-profit sector. While these organizations provided important resources to school improvement efforts, they often lack the understanding, capacity, and commitment to address critical issues of equity, race, class, and power that confront low-income communities, communities of color, and the schools in their neighborhoods.

Beyond a Deficit View: Using the Ideas, Energy, and Resources of the Entire Community

Just as there are necessary resources and capacities for school from universities, hospitals, and large-scale service organizations, there are equally important capacities and perspectives present within communities that are essential to the teaching and learning process. They

know the children and families in the communities, they know the community context, and they often provide services to them. Community and family engagement also helps ensure a focus on issues of inequity that often plague low-income communities and communities of color.

Effective community engagement seeks to create structures and practices and structures that fully utilizes the ideas, energy and resources of the entire community and makes all of us who participate in a process of accountability produce the best for our children. For example, the label of “parent” or “community member” does not fully capture the full aspect of person’s capacity or potential contribution to the education process. The “parent” may also be a trustee in a local church or a person pursuing a master’s degree. The “community member” may also be a retired teacher or an officer in a civic or cultural organization. Each role represents a connection to a potential asset for the education process. Effective community engagement structure should not assume individual limitations of family and community members, but rather attempt to mine every opportunity for access, capacity, and expertise the schools may desperately need.

Community Organizations: Vehicles for Leadership Development and Direct Action

An effective community engagement framework for education should not be limited to connecting with individual parents or community members. It should look at building engagement with organizations and institutions that have relationships with groups of organized parents, families, and community members. Over the last twenty-five years, a growing number of community-based organizations across the country have provided that infrastructure and leadership for

parent/community engagement and organizing efforts to improve their schools. Such grassroots organizations have been a vehicle for leadership development and direct action for parents, youth, and neighborhood residents who have a direct stake in creating effective, accessible, and accountable neighborhood schools.

Many of these organizations run programs and workshops attended by the same families and community members the schools are trying to engage. In these settings, parents and community members are having meaningful conversations about school issues with friends, family members, or staff members of the community organization. Moving education engagement events and activities to where these conversations are already taking place can help bridge the gap between school improvement activities and the everyday lives of parents and community members.

Community organizations with paid (often professional and trained) staff, stable funding streams, and a demonstrated long-term commitment to the revitalization of their communities can provide the platforms for parent/community efforts to improve their local schools, as well as help support the vitality and long-term viability of local school improvement efforts. Given frequently changing school leadership, these organizations are often the keepers of the community history of struggle for educational improvement and the link to connecting current community organizing struggles with past campaigns.

To do this engagement work effectively, organizations need to be:

- willing to be responsible and accountable to a defined constituency;
- willing to assign staff time and resources to build that constituency's

capacity through leadership development activities;

- focused on bringing people together to address issues through collective action;
- driven by a democratic decision-making process that allows membership concerns to define and direct the organization's activities.

The Power of Community-Based Coalitions and Partnerships

Some organizations are exploring the idea of building an education reform infrastructure within communities by linking together the capacity, resources, and constituencies of several local groups around a shared educational reform agenda. This collaborative structure supports the concepts of mutual investment and accountability between schools and community. Each participating group is clear about the time and resources they are prepared to invest to enable the collaborative to achieve its goals. Member groups dedicate staff to carry out the work of the collaborative, participate in fundraising, and mobilize their organization's constituency for collaborative meetings and events.

These collaborative structures have been instrumental in helping to change the culture of mutual distrust and animosity that often taints the communication between educators, parents, and communities. The regular and consistent gatherings of the collaboratives creates opportunities for open and honest conversation, identifying what they have in common, and deciding how they might work together toward a common goal of improving schools. Grounded in conversation, study, collaboration, and collective action, these collaboratives have cultivated new forms of interactions, rituals, and practices among educators, parents, unions, school district staff, and community groups.

These activities combine the traditional element of organizing – building power and demand for school improvement within communities – with a deliberate effort to forge accountable, outcome-driven relationships with key public education stakeholders. This new combination of practices has shifted the demand, attention, and action of community engagement efforts to addressing students’ instructional needs at both the school and district level simultaneously and employ a new set of strategies and tactics that allows groups to work together with educators on core instructional needs and concerns in schools. Their success offers hope for others seeking to build a powerful force rooted in parent and resident leadership, anchored by community organizations, and inclusive of other powerful stakeholders.

Q What are the challenges to authentic community engagement, and what do communities need to help sustain and build their capacity to support improving schools?

A Despite compelling evidence of the positive impact of family and community involvement,² barriers of power, culture, perceptions, and communication block the opportunity for a productive exchange of ideas, information, and resources between school systems and communities.

Hierarchy of Knowledge

Cultural mismatches can easily divide schools and communities. Traditional school culture pigeonholes the relationship between schools and the communities in a “hierarchy of knowledge” where the schools and the educators possess all the valued capability and expertise, and parents and communities are relegated limited support roles. This perceived gap of

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2 See Sara McAlister’s article in this issue of VUE.

capacity between school and communities is made even greater when factoring in issues of race, class, and ethnicity.

Not the “Real Work” of Educators

School staff have very little time, resources, professional development, or support in the area of building collaborations with families or community organizations outside the school setting. Engaging community and parents is seen as taking educators away from the “real” work of educators and those who want to develop effective partnerships with parents and community groups must often do so on their own time and through their own personally established relationships.

Even when schools dedicate staff for community and family engagement, it is usually one or two people with limited resources. School systems tend to identify individuals with community engagement capacity rather than creating and supporting a community engagement infrastructure that supports student achievement.

“Informing” vs. “Partnership”

Schools, districts, and even PTAs commonly complain about how it is difficult to get parents and community members to attend school-sponsored meetings, and their lack of participation is often cited as evidence that the community simply doesn’t value education. However, these school-based meetings lean heavily toward “informing” or “educating” people about decisions others have made about their children’s education. While these meetings can provide relevant and useful information, they rarely provide an opportunity for families and communities to examine the strengths and weakness of their school, nor do they create a

setting where parents and communities become active participants in creating the kind of schooling they want for their children.

Transforming schools in low-income and working-class communities requires a dramatic shift in the character, nature, and conditions of the education system to support and sustain relationships between public school practitioners, stakeholders, and policymakers that are informed, active, mutually accountable and focused on the pursuit of a common purpose: the goal of making better schools for all of our children. This type of change faces a daunting obstacle in the prevailing culture that exists for schools and districts. This process involves not only changing systems and roles of parent and communities within them, but also changing attitudes about and attachments to those traditional system values. In public education, attitudes and attachments change slowly and often with strong opposition.

Q How can authentic community engagement be fostered in federal policy?

A The Obama administration has increased the role and level of investment by the federal government in public education. President Obama’s “Blueprint for Reform” outlines the administration’s plan for reauthorizing No Child Left Behind and provides a number of resources intended to improve both the quality of education and supports for families and communities. However, the values and approaches taken by the administration are not aligned with many of those expressed by communities, particularly low-income communities of color.

Investments and Supports vs. Changing Structures

The four federally prescribed models for improving schools (Turnaround; Restart; School Closure; Transformation) emphasize the use of charters,³ school closures, and dismissals of teachers and principals as the means to improving school outcomes for students. Creating charters, closing schools, and removing educators may be necessary elements within a school improvement plan. But these strategies should not be the primary drivers of public education policy. Changing school structures and the people in them should be part of a broader vision that defines what investments and supports are needed to improve the instructional core within schools. These policies must also be designed so they can operate equitably in the current political, social, cultural, and fiscal environments that characterize many communities and schools.

A Shift from Fostering Competition Back to Ensuring Equity

Current federal education policy demonstrates a shift in the role of federal government from ensuring equity in public education to a focus on creating competition among schools, particularly between traditional and charter schools. Competition – a contest between rivals – implies that market forces in public education will spark innovation and result in better education services. However, in spite of years of widespread reliance on market forces for improvement, inequities not only stubbornly persist in education, as in our society as a whole, but often deepen.

Creating equitable access to high-quality education has been a fundamental, defining, and often elusive value of the American public school system. For

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³ While evidence is mixed on the performance of individual charters, they remain an unproven model for school improvement at scale.

many years, people have fought and challenged schools across the country to provide equity and excellence for all children. Historically, the federal government has played a critical role in that struggle by pushing public schools and school systems to expand access to fairness in educational opportunity as well as confronting racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers to quality public education. No other entity has the power and public mandate to rectify these injustices on a national scale. It's important that the federal government reaffirm its commitment to the value of equity and shape its policy approaches accordingly.

Collaboration vs. a Top-Down Approach

The current federal education transformation policy impacting schools across the country was developed and implemented with little input from community stakeholders. This top-down approach impeded the development of a sense of ownership and sustained support from key stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, business leaders, and other community members for the transformation process.

An example of a more collaborative school improvement approach is the Sustainable School Transformation model created by the Communities for Excellent Public Schools (CEPS) and currently the foundation of a campaign for federal adoption by the Journey for Justice Coalition (J4J).⁴ Both CEPS and J4J are national coalitions of community and youth organizations with demonstrated capacity and experience in creating successful and innovative school improvement models with par-

ent, youth, and community support and participation. “Sustainable School Transformation,” has the follow core elements:

- Strong focus on school culture, curriculum, and staffing.
- Using education reform models that are research based and have a demonstrated record of success in the field.
- Collaboration with families, communities, and local stakeholders to foster shared ownership and accountability.

President Obama in his recent inaugural address stated that “you and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country’s course” and “have the obligation to shape the debates of our time, not only with the votes we cast, but the voices we lift in defense of our most ancient values and enduring ideas.” This statement of the value and importance of democratic participation, power, and responsibility has helped shape changes in his policies on gay marriage and immigration. We urge the president to listen to the voices of parents, students, and communities raised in defense of important and enduring values and ideas of educational equity, opportunity, and justice.

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⁴ For more information about Communities for Excellent Public Schools, see www.excellentpublicschools.org. For more information about the Journey for Justice Coalition, see www.journeyforjustice.org.